

Getting Started on the County Board

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So, you've been elected to the county board. Now what? You likely have a few specific issues that you ran on and are close to your heart. You may even have things that you want to accomplish right away. In your attempt to implement change, there are a few things you should know before you get started.

In the first few days after the election, you will likely receive letters from other supervisors who wish to be elected to a leadership position on the county board. These will primarily come from veteran members of the county board. This provides you with a great opportunity to meet these individuals and learn everything you can about the county. This interaction will allow you to determine where you fit into the current board's ideology, understand the expectations others have of you and learn more about your roles and responsibilities as a county supervisor.

Within a couple of weeks after you are elected, you should learn the committee structure of your county. Ultimately, there is someone, generally the county board chair, who assigns supervisors to committees. You may be given a chance to prioritize the committees on which you wish to be a member. It is a good idea to learn your county's committee structure and the responsibilities of each committee as every county can be different. With this knowledge, you will be better prepared to select committees in which you have an interest, and in turn, this will give you a better chance of being placed on the committees where the issues important to you will come up for debate.

Be cognizant of the times committees meet and see how they will fit into your schedule. There is often an opportunity to change the meeting time at the first committee meeting, but, with a committee full of veteran supervisors who have always met at a certain time, this may be difficult.

Once you have received your committee assignments, you may again receive letters and phone calls from supervisors asking for your support as they seek to be an officer of that committee. Your county will either elect committee chairs by vote of the committee or they will be assigned by the county board chair.

Committees work to make recommendations to the full county board. You will quickly learn that committees are where most of the work of the county board gets done. This is a time to work out the problems of any resolution or ordinance before it goes to the floor of the county board. Because of their smaller size, committees are a good place to ask questions and learn more about the issues. Generally, supervisors follow the recommendations of a committee when a piece of policy is brought to the full county board because there is generally not enough time for every county board supervisor to be knowledgeable about every issue. Another strategy used by county supervisors is to identify a group of people from other committees with similar beliefs and values and examine how they voted on an issue in order to inform your own voting decision.

As you begin to develop an understanding of the committee structure and where you see yourself fitting in, you will want to quickly learn a number of other things that will prove valuable as you move forward. Learning

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and understanding parliamentary procedure is vital as you will need to use it during official county meetings. To learn more about this, see the chapter in this handbook, *A Few FAQ's on Parliamentary Procedure*.

There are also a number of things you should know about your county. First, you should understand the form of government your county uses. Each county in the state has a statutory obligation to appoint an administrative coordinator to oversee the day-to-day operations of the county. Some of the smaller counties designate the county board chair to fill this role, while others hire a full-time employee as administrative coordinator or administrator. Counties may go one step further and allow the public to elect an executive who serves a four-year term. Pursuant to the state statutes, any county with over 500,000 people must elect a county executive. It is important to understand the authority your county has given to the person serving as your county's manager.

Second, you should know the process the county board follows in developing policy. Policy is introduced and voted upon in three ways—ordinances, resolutions and budgets. Every county has different procedures for introducing policy, as well as different procedures for each method.

Veteran supervisors will tell you that the budget is the most important document that passes each year. You should understand where the money comes from—namely, the various taxes and fees your county collects; and, where the money goes—mandated versus non-mandated programs. For more detailed information about county budgeting, refer to the *County Budgets & Financial Management* chapter in this handbook.

It is also important to look at the demographics of the county in conjunction with the budget. This vital information shows how the budget matches the breakdown of people in your county. Demographics will prove valuable when planning for future population changes, such as the aging of the baby-boomer population. A good Internet source for general demographic information is www.census.gov.

Last, but certainly not least, you should know about the Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA), namely who we are and what we do. WCA is an association of county governments assembled for the purpose of serving and representing counties. Under the direction of the WCA Board of Directors, the association's primary focus is representing the interests of counties at the state and federal level. In addition, WCA provides a monthly magazine, *Wisconsin Counties*, a weekly electronic newsletter, *WCA eNews*, as well as a Web site, www.wicounties.org. Ongoing training and educational opportunities through seminars, the legislative exchange and the annual statewide conference are other resources that are available to the WCA membership. Finally, WCA is able to offer insurance services to county governments through the WCA Group Health Trust and the Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation.

The quest for change seldom comes without difficulty. Your career in public service will likely be filled with success and failure. Educating yourself on the information in this handbook will get you started down the right path.